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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000891

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TAGS: PREL AG MR

SUBJECT: VISIT TO ALGERIA OF MAURITANIAN LEADER CONFERS DEGREE OF LEGITIMACY

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman: Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

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**¶1.** (C) The May 6-7 visit of Mauritanian Military Council President Val to Algeria has given Val a strong seal of regime approval, bilateral ties a boost in a number of areas, and the Algerians an IOU of sorts on issues of concern. We believe the visit falls in the context of Algerian efforts to shore up support from neighbors and friends to the south and elsewhere in Africa in the face of: 1) continuing differences with Morocco and impasse over the Western Sahara; 2) Algeria's desire for strengthened regional cooperation against terrorist groups operating in the Sahel; and 3) irritation with Libya's proposal to unite desert tribal groups in a "Greater Sahara" entity and its recent dispatch of a senior envoy to meet with Mohammed VI in the Western Sahara (i.e., "occupied territory.") The Val visit definitively ends a period of tentativeness and even coolness in Algerian-Mauritanian relations in the wake of the coup that brought Val to power last year, in contravention of African Union principles. It also follows PM Ouyahia's visit to Nouakchott last fall for meetings of the mixed bilateral commission as well as a first-time meeting between Val and President Bouteflika on the margins of a recent regional summit.

**¶2.** (C) Underscoring his new legitimacy in Algerian eyes, Val was treated with full military honors on arrival, a canon salute and national anthems, ambassadors assembled along a red carpet to greet him individually, and a state lunch with official toasts. At the same time, Bouteflika, both in his toast and in the Joint Communique, made clear the importance Algeria attached to continued efforts to build democracy in Mauritania. On several issues, most notably the Western Sahara and Middle East peace issues, the communique language was considerably more muted than Bouteflika's toast language, apparently reflecting Nouakchott's ties with Israel, Val's personal ties to Morocco (where Algerian newspapers report he did his military training), and (according to the Mauritanian ambassador) Mauritania's desire to remain as neutral as possible on the Western Sahara dispute. (End Summary and Comment)

JOINT COMMUNIQUE: POSITIVE BILATERAL DEVELOPMENTS AND SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN MAURITANIA

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**¶3.** (C) The May 7 Joint Communique signaled a further, significant step toward rapprochement and normalization of bilateral relations which had cooled in the wake of the coup that brought Val to power in violation of African Union principles enshrined in the "Algiers Accord." The communique characterized the results of the visit as marking "a major

stage" in their relations and giving new impetus to the development of their bilateral cooperation, specifically highlighting "realistic" cooperation in the area of energy, mining, and fishing. The Mauritanian Ambassador told Ambassador the visit had been a major step forward for Mauritanian-Algerian relations and placed special importance on the agreement to construct a road directly linking Algeria and Mauritania. He also said there had been full agreement on counter-terrorism cooperation and the benefits of moving forward to set up a regional defense cooperation framework to facilitate regional efforts against terrorist groups using southern Algeria and the Sahel as a base of support for their operations.

¶4. (SBU) On the issue of democratic evolution in Mauritania, the communique cited President Bouteflika's support for the "courageous steps" taken in the wake of the peaceful "change" (i.e., the bloodless August 2005 coup) to consolidate "the democratic process in Mauritania and the building of a society where justice and democracy reign." Bouteflika also helpfully reinforced the importance of building democracy in his official toast. Noting that Algeria was following "in a spirit of tolerance" the changes that occurred the previous years, he said Algeria viewed Val's efforts to strengthen the democratic process in Mauritania as an affirmation of his desire to lay the foundation for "authentic change." These efforts indicated Val's "sincere intentions" and attested to his determination to honor his commitments to build a just, democratic, and prosperous society for the Mauritanian people.

#### BUT SIGNS OF DIFFERENCES ON SOME REGIONAL ISSUES

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¶5. (C) Despite subtle indications of differences on some regional issues, the communique also expressed "total

ALGIERS 00000891 002 OF 003

satisfaction" with the convergence of views on the issues that had been discussed. Bouteflika in his toast alluded to these differences in noting that the visit "will permit (both sides) to eliminate everything that could hinder the dynamic of their cooperation." Among the regional issues cited in the communique were:

-- Arab Maghreb Union: Both sides expressed their "unshakable support" for the Arab Maghreb Union, which was termed a "strategic option," as well as their willingness to contribute to efforts to realize the aspirations of the "Maghrebian peoples" for development, stability, and integration. Elaborating on this theme and clearly alluding to the Western Sahara dispute, Bouteflika in his toast underscored Algeria's attachment to Maghreb integration, adding that this goal is a function of the will of "all concerned peoples" of the region. It is thus a matter of liberating this will so that it can be fully realized by eliminating the "corridors of tension" and permitting the Sahrawi people to exercise their legitimate right to self-determination, as guaranteed in the UN Charter and consolidated in UN Security Council resolutions.

-- Western Sahara: Through omission, differences over the Western Sahara were evident. The sparse language of the communique simply noted that the two sides affirmed their support for relevant UN "decisions" aimed at finding a peaceful, just, and permanent solution. There was no reference to UN resolutions per se, no reference to self-determination for the Sahrawi people, no reference to the Baker Plan as the desired basis for a solution, and no reference to the efforts of UN Personal Representative Van Walsum (which Algeria fears will the lead away from the current UN and legal framework for dealing with the Western Sahara). In this context, it is notable that Val, in his toast, expressed Mauritania's "support for UN efforts to achieve a permanent solution" to the Western Sahara question.

The Mauritanian ambassador confirmed to Ambassador that the Algerian side had wanted more robust language on the Western

Sahara but that Mauritania wanted to keep out of this problem, avoid details, and limit itself to supporting a solution in a UN framework.

-- Middle East Peace: There was also a significant contrast between the muted language of the communique and the sharper tone of Bouteflika's toast, a difference no doubt reflecting Mauritania's more nuanced view of the Israel-Palestinian issue and the fact that it has diplomatic relations with Israel. In the communique, both sides reiterated their solidarity with the Palestinian people and affirmed that the Beirut peace plan adopted by the Arab League in 2002 constitutes "the" basis for a comprehensive, just, and permanent solution permitting the Palestinian people an independent state "on their territories," with "El Qods" as its capital. Whereas Val simply repeated the communique formula in his toast, Bouteflika was predictably sharper, noting "concern and bitterness" over the escalation of the situation in the Middle East, the impasse in the peace process, and Israel's policy of "faits accomplis." He said Algeria condemned the "blockade" that "certain countries" were trying to impose on the Palestinian people and criticized double standards, while reaffirming support for the Arab League plan and the urgent need to rehabilitate the Road Map.

-- Iraq: The communique expressed deep concern over the situation in Iraq, underlined support for their efforts to enable Iraq's new constitutional institutions to carry out their role, and affirmed the importance of preserving Iraq's national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The communique also helpfully condemned terrorist actions targeting Iraq, which undermined its national unity and security and stability in the region. In his toast, Bouteflika was again predictably more expansive, reaffirming UNSC 1546 and noting that Iraqi suffering and preservation of its territorial integrity would only come about with the end of occupation and interference in its internal affairs (the latter a subtle allusion to Iran.)

-- Sudan/Darfur: The communique briefly welcomed the Darfur Peace Agreement, hoping it would be a prelude to a new era of peace and harmony for "all the children" of Sudan. In his toast, Bouteflika hailed the efforts of Sudanese President Bashir to resolve the Darfur crisis and the role of the African Union in guaranteeing the success of the negotiations; hoped the new agreement would help convince other parties to sign the agreement; expressed optimism about the agreement between the Chadian and Sudanese presidents brokered by Qadhafi; and called upon the international community to support efforts of the parties to reach a

ALGIERS 00000891 003 OF 003

definitive solution to the Darfur crisis in close coordination with the African Union. On the margins of the airport departure ceremony, Bouteflika expressed to Ambassador his great appreciation for the positive U.S. role in concluding the Darfur Peace Agreement.  
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